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May 10, 1999, and the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/134,066, filed May 13, 1999, the content of which is incorporated herein by reference.--

Page 1, after "BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION", insert the following new subheading:

--Field of the Invention--.

Page 1, before line 9, add the following new subheading:

--Description of the Related Art--.

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please cancel now pending claims 1-26 without prejudice or disclaimer and substitute new claims 27-50 therefor as follows:

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

- a¹ 27. (New) A method for drawing an optical preform of large diameter into an optical fiber or into a preform of smaller diameter, said method comprising:
- a) introducing said optical preform into a drawing furnace through a top chimney connected to said furnace, said drawing furnace further comprising a bottom chimney;
 - b) mechanically sealing the upper portion of said top chimney;
 - c) heating the bottom end of said preform into the furnace to its softening temperature;
 - d) introducing a flow of conditioning gas into said top chimney by imparting a downward angled direction to said flow of conditioning gas entering said top chimney; and

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